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Balancing identity and reality / Book Review of China Rising by David Kang

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As Kang's thinking evolves, I hope that he will devote more attention to the political consequences of deeper and closer economic relations with China (pp. 66–67). China has emerged as the number one or number two trading partner of virtually every country in East Asia. From the perspective of any one of those countries, this trade dependence with China is asymmetrical because China possesses all the leverage. This worries some experts in the U.S. military community. I argue elsewhere, however, that despite this asymmetry economic dependence is in fact mutual. Though any trade partner may be expendable, China is dependent on other Asian countries as a group to supply materials and parts, facilitate technology transfer, and create wealth and influence, thereby bolstering the government's legitimacy.[7] This mutuality is quite consistent with Kang's views.

Adding to a growing scholarly interest in regions as pillars of global order, Kang's thesis should stimulate fundamental questions regarding the complex interaction between the global system, the behavior of regional powers, and local responses. This reviewer came away from the book persuaded more firmly than ever that East Asian countries have developed a regional order that is both stable and sufficiently flexible to adapt to—and influence—a rising China. The burden of proof has now shifted to those who argue that Asia's stability is fleeting.

[7] Ellen L. Frost, *Asia's New Regionalism* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 165–66.

Balancing Identity and Reality

Christopher P. Twomey

In *China Rising* David Kang advances two claims—one empirical, one causal—that challenge the core tenets of classic international relations theory. First, Kang argues that East Asian states are in fact accommodating rather than balancing China. Second, he argues that this behavior is a result of the

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specific conceptions of identity in China and her neighbors (p. 4). These arguments have critical importance for U.S. foreign policy in the region, as Kang rightly emphasizes in his conclusion. By arguing that the very nature of international interaction is specific to the culture of the actors, *China Rising* constitutes a formidable broadside against important strains in international relations literature.

Admirable for its clarity and for its timely attention both to the peculiarities of Asian international affairs and to Beijing's role in the region, *China Rising* nevertheless suffers from three main weaknesses: first, the book neglects detailed analysis of the core tools of hard balancing; second, the proposed causal argument not only fails in important cases but also neglects important alternate explanations; third, the evaluation of identity in *China Rising* falls short of the high standard established by other works in the constructivist tradition.

Kang's empirical claim possesses some verisimilitude but is oversimplified. Kang correctly observes that Asian states are not engaged in containment of China. Such a sweeping statement, however, illuminates little of importance regarding contemporary Asian security affairs. In a helpful chart (p. 55) Kang disaggregates the region, sketching a wide range of behavior toward China: North Korea is actively bandwagoning with China, while Taiwan is balancing against Beijing; Vietnam and Malaysia are leaning toward North Korea's strategy, while Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines are following Taiwan in balancing against China. More often, however, Kang coats the region with a veneer of consistency that minimizes the importance of national differences. The nuanced view of relations toward China afforded by the chart is valuable, and indeed justifying the chart's coding and explaining such wide variation would serve the field well.

Doing so, however, would have required a more explicit focus on the metrics by which balancing policy is judged. Kang wisely steers away from incorporating "soft balancing" in his appraisal of Asian policy; such a concept is notably hard to evaluate systematically and objectively. Nonetheless, a richer discussion of how to array security policy is warranted in a book on "hard balancing." Though "military buildups and defense spending, or countervailing military alliances aimed at an adversary" (p. 52), do capture the broadest level of such behavior, a more exhaustive discussion would have considered the composition of military forces and a wider range of alignment patterns. Specifically, shifts in the make-up of military forces can conceal balancing attempts within a fixed budget. Thus, Kang's emphasis on cuts in Japanese ground forces obscures a shift in Japanese capabilities that

are militarily relevant to China.[1] The reinvigoration of the U.S.-Japan alliance that began in the late 1990s is clearly, if quietly, aimed at China (as is well understood in Beijing). Similarly, China's occupation and militarization of Mischief Reef in 1995 was the turning point in U.S.-Philippine relations—not the later increase in the salience of the threat of terrorism to U.S. interests.[2] A more nuanced discussion of the core tools of hard balancing—military capabilities and variations in alignment patterns—would have complicated further the sweeping assertion that "East Asian states are not balancing China" (p. 4) and would have called attention to the wide variation in those nations' policies toward the Middle Kingdom.

Whether or not one accepts these empirical critiques, Kang's causal argument fails in two ways. First, Kang's correct statement that the United States lacks an Asian identity (p. 187) implies that the United States is not subject to the same culturally derived predisposition that leads true "Asian" states to "accept, rather than fear, China's expected emergence as a powerful and perhaps the dominant state in East Asia" (pp. 197–98). If that is the case, why is the United States not balancing against China more (p. 189–92)? The answer is of course that China's intentions are ambiguous and the spiraling dangers of the security dilemma lead the United States to hedge as other Asian nations have done.[3] Asian identity needs not play any role in such an explanation.

Second, Kang neglects careful consideration of two core material factors: power ratios and geography. It is a standard prediction of realism that small states tend toward bandwagoning.[4] That some small states fight back when invaded (e.g., Iraq and Afghanistan), find great power patrons and involuntarily host proxy wars (e.g., Vietnam), or are difficult to pacify after conquest does not systematically undermine this realist prediction, as Kang purports is the case (pp. 10, 192). Furthermore, the "stopping power of water"

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1 In some cases Kang does take a more fine-grained approach to military power; see the discussion of South Korea (p. 56) in particular. In other cases, more attention is needed; see, for example, the discussion of the Taiwan military balance (p. 98).

2 Kang's own chronology on p. 139 suggests this. Other cases of alignment policy that would have benefited from a more detailed and systematic analysis are Japan in the 1980s and 1990s (p. 170) and Singapore (p. 62 and pp. 193–94).

3 This reviewer would characterize the policies of several Asian nations more as hedging rather than as accommodation relative to Kang's coding. In other places I have criticized U.S. policy as being too much aimed at balancing. See Christopher P. Twomey, "Missing Strategic Opportunity in U.S. China Policy since 9/11: Grasping Tactical Success," *Asian Survey* 47, no.4 (July/August 2007): 536–59. The issue of contention here, however, is not the empirical characterization of policy but rather—given the substantial difference in identity, Kang's core independent variable—the lack of more widely divergent policy between the United States and the Asian states.

4 See, for example, Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

(and long distance) greatly impedes the projection of power across seas and oceans for all but the most lopsided dyads.[5] These factors account for much of the variation in East Asian states' balancing against China. Thus, Japan and Taiwan benefit from moats and so can engage in the most robust competition with China of any state in Kang's sample. Geographic contiguity, by contrast, curses Vietnam and Korea and forces both countries to cozy up to China. Singapore, miniscule in power terms but far away from China, can turn to the United States by hosting a major U.S. Navy command and tailoring a harbor to the United States' most capable power projection asset, Nimitz-class supercarriers.[6] These factors explain the variation in Kang's cases. Were Asian identity the paramount factor in explaining this variation, Taiwan and Singapore would be the most tolerant of China's rise given shared cultural roots with the mainland.

Constructivism in general has enjoyed considerable success in challenging core tenets of the international relations literature.[7] Constructivist literature is typically rather modest in terms of causal claims and is diligent in its rigor. It problematizes the sources and repositories of culture. It recognizes the importance of cultural malleability and change. It appreciates the multiplicities of competing themes in any national culture. Furthermore, much of constructivist literature is meticulous in its methodology for characterizing identity, typically drawing on an intensive, sociological approach to this challenging concept. In these respects, *China Rising* does not live up to the promise of the broader literature within which the book is situated.[8]

Kang does at times delve into the sociological sources of identity (the South Korean case is strongest, see p. 107–09). More often, however, Kang's actual coding of national identity derives from a range of other factors, each with limitations. Polling is fickle and not optimized for measuring deeply

5 The term is from John J. Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

6 Making the same geographic point is Robert S. Ross in "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 81–118.

7 See, for example, Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Anne L. Clunan, *Reconstructing Grandeur: Identity and the Sources of Russian Security Policy* (forthcoming, 2009); Melissa J. Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Neta C. Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

8 Note, however, that at times Kang makes clear he is aware of these issues (see, for example, pp. 21, 49, 81, 83, and 103).

held ideas concerning the nature of international relations. Domestic politics should be separated from, not conflated with, cultural identity (for instance see the Japan case on p. 182). Likewise, the relationship between economic ties and identity can be mutually constitutive or epiphenomenal. The Chinese leadership, for example, has a political need for rapid economic growth (p. 85), and this need certainly has important implications for Beijing's foreign policy.[9] Yet, it would be wrong to locate that preference in a culturally derived Chinese identity.

Similarly, in *China Rising* Kang is aspiring to a characterization of an intersubjective identity that might shape international relations in the way Alexander Wendt has outlined.[10] The preponderance of the characterizations of identity in the book, however, concerns a nation's self-identification. This approach is more consistent with work by constructivists such as Hopf.[11] Such a disjuncture between the independent and dependent variable at least requires explication: the way that the self-identity of individual nations shapes the nature of the international system they constitute is not axiomatic.

Identity is a challenging concept to evaluate with rigor. An ethnographic, anthropologic approach to international relations has much promise, and indeed Kang is right to draw his reader's attention to the merits of this approach. Such an approach may also have important implications for the study of East Asia in particular. *China Rising* serves as an important starting point for such work.

9 Although, again highlighting a potentially fickle area, many worry about the prospect that a xenophobic nationalism might be substituted for economic growth as a means to legitimize China's failing authoritarian government.

10 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics.*

11 Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics.*